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Arctic Care 2004

This month finds me serving as your roving reporter sending copy from above the Arctic Circle as I conclude my visit to our Naval Reserve medical department personnel and many others who are participating in Arctic Care 2004. This also represents a homecoming for me as well, since I first had the opportunity to participate in Arctic Care during 1996 as a team leader and primary care provider in the Alaskan Native village of Kivalina during my Annual Training that year. My affiliation with this exercise is a strong one, since I visited the exercise during the three years I held command of the 4th Medical Battalion, 4th Force Service Support Group, in the late 1990's, and during my two years as Marine Forces Reserve Surgeon in 2001 and 2002. I hope my readers will forgive these personal references, as they are intended merely to indicate my long-term involvement in and appreciation of this endeavor.

Arctic Care has reached its tenth anniversary this year and has come full circle, returning to the Northwest Arctic borough for the first time since its initial two years, with its command post located in the town of Kotzebue, just north of the Arctic Circle, and situated on the Chukchi Sea. (Break open your atlases!) This exercise is a Joint Medical Readiness and Logistics training exercise conducted under the aegis of the Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Program operated by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, The Honorable Tom Hall, former National Executive Director of the Naval Reserve Association. The 4th Force Service Support Group, a major subordinate command of Marine Forces Reserve, is the lead agent for the exercise; and the exercise is carried out with the cooperation of the Maniilaq Health Corporation, an Alaskan Native owned and operated, nonprofit agency that provides all health services in this area of rural Alaska.

The IRT program provides humanitarian

assistance to rural areas within the United States that have no alternate sources for these services. Arctic Care is joint, involving Active and Reserve Components (including Guard) of the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, and USPHS. Teams providing medical, dental, optometric, and veterinary care are deployed by air (Blackhawks and Chinooks) to remote coastal and inland villages over an AOR the size of the state of Indiana. These teams are resupplied as necessary by tactical rotary aircraft; and, in many cases, teams are displaced during the exercise from one location to another during the conduct of the exercise. The local populations receive convenient primary medical, dental, and optometric care that is not otherwise readily available. Our military teams operate in cooperation with the local community health aides in the local network of community health clinics. Veterinary teams conduct immunization and spaying/neutering programs as well as patient education programs on animal bite prevention for the children in the villages. All participants learn to live and work in the austere, cold weather environment of rural Alaska in April-May. In addition to the health care that is provided, the exercise provides excellent training for flight crews and Marines involved in running the logistical support aspects of the mission under often challenging weather conditions, over long distances, and with realistic challenges of communication and command and control over widely dispersed operational elements.

As of this writing, the exercise is about to begin its second week of operations. To date, the exercise has provided over 900 medical visits, over 500 dental visits, over 350 optometric visits, and over 500 veterinary visits. Over 2000 children have received animal bite and hand washing education. These services were provided by 59 officers and 84 enlisted personnel, including 50 Navy, 16 Marine Corps, 16 Air Force, 53 Army, and 8 USPHS members. The teams of health care providers and support personnel are deployed to 11 remote villages and coordinated by a command element located in Kotzebue. In addition, a gastroenterologist and dental teams are providing services at the central hospital (Maniilaq Health Center) in Kotzebue.

Teams operate in health clinics that are connected to the central hospital by phone, fax and e-mail. The environment is challenging, with temperatures typically ranging from freezing

downward. This year, the exercise has been blessed with favorable weather (clear skies) and warmer conditions than usual (40's-50's); and there are signs of the ocean ice pack readying for breakup and of melting of the rivers in the interior. While transportation is only by helicopter at this time of year for the participants and living conditions relatively Spartan, the scenery can be spectacular. During the weekend past, RADM's Duret Smith (current MARFORRES Surgeon), Mo Hill (Assistant Chief of the Dental Corps), and Lew Libby (current MARFORRES Dental Officer), and I had the chance to visit three sites by helicopter, along with other visiting personnel. Sites visited included the coastal village of Point Hope, the farthest north site at about 145 miles northwest of Kotzebue, as well as Noorvik and Kiana which are interior villages, the latter located at the confluence of the Kobuk and Squirrel rivers. The caribou were in full migration and easily seen on our helicopter journeys to these latter sites. Uniformly, the people of the villages that we met were highly complimentary and appreciative of the military personnel and their contributions. Equally effusive comments were made by team members in commenting on their sense of satisfaction in providing care for the local populations, and the training they were receiving in living and working in rural Alaska. Morale was uniformly high, and the neighborly reception of being invited into local homes and participating in fishing and other activities during off-duty hours was deeply appreciated by team members.

Arctic Care has operated in several different areas of Alaska over the last decade. In addition to this year's exercise in the Northwest Arctic borough, earlier exercises have taken place in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay areas of southwestern Alaska, as well as in the Aleutians, and last year in the interior regions surrounding Fairbanks. With its unique blend of care for our fellow American citizens, operational training in an austere, cold weather environment, and under challenging logistical and communications circumstances, and with the benefits of jointness, and active-reserve integration and interagency cooperation, Arctic Care embodies all the elements which have made it the highly successful and long-term endeavor in the IRT program that it is. My hope is that Arctic Care will enjoy yet another decade (and more) of success in achieving the unique blend of excellence that it has enjoyed to date. ♪